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MONITORING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NAIROBI FORWARD-LOOKING STRATEGIES FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN

Situation of and assistance to Palestinian women

Report of the Secretary-General

SUMMARY

In its resolution 38/4, entitled "Palestinian women", the Commission on the Status of Women requested the Secretary-General to continue to review the situation of and to assist Palestinian women by all available means, and to submit to the Commission, at its thirty-ninth session, a report on the progress made in the implementation of the resolution. The present report responds to that request and highlights the issues of concern for Palestinian women within the present political context. It monitors the situation in the fields of violence, governance, health, education and employment. Emphasis is put on the development aspects and the participation of women in political decision-making. Preparing for de facto and de jure equality has gained importance as has the integration of a gender perspective in all areas of legislation, infrastructure development and human resource and economic development.

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INTRODUCTION

1. In its resolution 38/4, entitled "Palestinian women", the Commission on the Status of Women requested the Secretary-General to continue to review the situation of and to assist Palestinian women by all available means, and to submit to the Commission, at its thirty-ninth session, a report on the progress made in the implementation of the resolution. It requested the Commission on the Status of Women to continue to monitor and take action with regard to the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women, in particular paragraph 260 concerning Palestinian women and children.

2. The World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace (Nairobi, 1985), considered the issue of Palestinian women and children under the rubric "peace" and concluded in paragraph 260 of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies:

> "For more than three decades, Palestinian women have faced difficult living conditions in camps and outside, struggling for the survival of their families and the survival of the Palestinian people who were deprived of their ancestral lands and denied the inalienable rights to return to their homes and their property, their right to self-determination, national independence and sovereignty. ... The special and immediate needs of Palestinian women and children should be identified and appropriate provision made. United Nations projects should be initiated to help Palestinian women in the fields of health, education, and vocational training. Their living conditions inside and outside the occupied territories should be studied by the appropriate United Nations units and agencies, assisted, as appropriate, by specialized research institutes from various regions." 1/

3. In preparation for the Fourth World Conference on Women, to be held in Beijing in 1995, the monitoring of the implementation of paragraph 260 of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies is being undertaken, including consideration of recent political developments and their impact on the status of women. The Arab Regional Preparatory Meeting, convened in Amman from 6 to 10 November 1994, states in its general framework:

> "A comprehensive and just peace and stability in the region are prerequisites to development and equality. A comprehensive and just peace would free the human and financial resources that are being spent on military equipment and wars, when they could be geared toward development that provides women with equal opportunities for participation." 2/

4. Since 1985, reports on Palestinian women have been submitted on a regular basis to the Commission on the Status of Women, most recently at its thirty-eighth session. The present report describes the situation of Palestinian women related to violence, equal rights, governance, employment, education and health. In view of the planned establishment, for a transitional period, of a Palestinian interim self-government authority and elected council for the Palestinian people in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, emphasis is placed on the development aspect and on the enhancement of women's participation in the

elaboration of a permanent settlement of the conflict and the integration of a gender perspective in all areas of legislation, infrastructure development and human resource and economic development. The transitional period began in Gaza and Jericho, which in May 1994 became self-rule areas under the newly established Palestinian Authority. The present report is based on various recent documents published by the United Nations system and specialized agencies, as well as other sources. No information was available on the specific conditions of women in the self-rule areas.

I. VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

5. The period under review was characterized by a decline of the overall level of violence in the occupied territories following the signing by Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) of the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements in September 1993 and the Agreement on the Gaza Strip and the Jericho area (A/49/180-S/1994/727, annex). Since the beginning of the intifadah, dozens of Palestinian women have been killed by Israeli soldiers, settlers or collaborators, often random victims of violent clashes. Women have been harassed by soldiers, in particular when their homes were being searched. A number of female political prisoners remain in jail, several of them under the age of 18. Women prisoners have experienced violence in interrogation and imprisonment.

6. Sporadic outbreaks of protest and demonstration have been met by the Israeli authorities with repressive measures against the civilian population. Collective punishment such as prolonged curfews and closures has brought with it economic and social hardship and increased the level of poverty. 3/ In particular, the sealing of the occupied territories after the Hebron massacre on 25 February 1994 and its aftermath led to increased economic losses for Palestinian workers employed in Israel. Since the movement of goods between Israel and the occupied territories and within the occupied territories themselves had also been interrupted, Palestinian manufacturers and farmers lost considerable income. During the period under review the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) distributed food on an emergency basis to 75,000 families in the West Bank and 95,000 families in the Gaza Strip. 4/ In addition, continued confiscation of land and destruction of houses negatively affected the economic resource of Palestinian families.

7. The experience of violence during the intifadah and afterwards has had negative and chronic effects on the psychological well-being of children and their mothers. Children who were subjected to traumatic events such as torture or who witness the killing of a relative or friend display high levels of anxiety and psychosomatic illnesses. Curfews that confine family members to their home for extended periods, and other measures of collective punishment, continue to put psychological strain on family members. There has been an erosion of male authority within the household, since men were subjugated and helpless in situations of violence during the intifadah. Problems of depression, fear and aggressiveness have increased dramatically among children. Manifested symptoms include lack of concentration, disobedience and increased aggressiveness. Psychosomatic illnesses and ailments were reported at epidemic

levels among traumatized mothers during the intifadah and continue to have an impact. 5/ Mental health care projects have been established in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to offer treatment and alleviate the harrowing effect of trauma in children and mothers. 6/

8. Besides the violence arising from the occupation, the Palestinian woman is confronted with various kinds of physical, sexual or psychological violence from her family or from society in general. Women's organizations have begun to collect evidence of domestic violence against women, which has previously been a taboo subject. They denounce traditional forms of social control such as urging girls to quit school prematurely, wear the veil or get married against their will.

II. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND GOVERNANCE

9. With the launching of Palestinian self-rule women's contribution to institution-building and legislation has gained importance. There is increased public awareness about women's status, respect for and acceptance of the work of women's organizations is high, and women are prepared to play an active role in government.

A. Women's organizations and committees

10. A historic review shows that Palestinian women's organizations have grown within the national movement and have been influenced by political events. The General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) was formed in 1965 as a women's section within the PLO. 7/ With the beginning of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in 1967, traditional charitable organizations increased their relief activities, but also started to develop income-generating activities and vocational training for girls and women. These activities remained concentrated in the urban areas of the West Bank and were carried out by middle- and upper-class women.

11. In the late 1970s, a new generation of women activists, highly politicized and well-educated, emerged. Women's committees, relying on the various political factions and parties, were established to address the national and social oppression of women. The unified women's committees successfully mobilized women throughout the occupied territories, in refugee camps as well as in remote villages, which has engendered increased awareness among all women involved. Barriers between urban and rural, middle- and lower-class women were overcome.

12. Women's popular committees have often been considered as alternative institutions and part of a possible infrastructure within a future Palestinian Government. During the intifadah, which began in December 1987, women became actively involved in agriculture, education, food storage, medical and guarding committees. They developed home economy as a community-based form of self-reliance. Women continued their former charitable activities such as food distribution and support of homeless families and families of prisoners and

victims. Their activities were recognized by the political leadership as an important support to the uprising.

B. Equal rights for women

13. In their early years, women's committees gave priority to the national struggle for liberation and neglected the issue of emancipation and achievement of equality in a patriarchal society. Women did not want to split their activities and open an internal argument at a time when all efforts were needed for the resistance against occupation. Living under occupation had impelled the Palestinian people to hold onto their customs and traditions as a mechanism for preserving their national, cultural and social identity. This has played a major role in enforcing many stereotypes that are discriminatory towards women. 8/ The active participation of women of all ages and social backgrounds in demonstrations and in confrontations with the army contributed to a change in the public image of women. Increased awareness and self-confidence encouraged women to take on leading positions and to publicly criticize the long neglect of social and gender issues. Women's participation in decision-making increased as a result of the experience in the popular committees. 9/ A new feminist consciousness set up a "gender agenda" for the women's movement. Palestinian women increasingly questioned their initial assumption that they would legally and automatically obtain their rights along with national independence. Women's committees and international organizations, including UNRWA, organized courses to inform women about their rights and to raise awareness on legal matters. 10/

14. Women's organizations and human rights groups prepared amendments to the proposed personal status, social and civil laws. Efforts were made to include the provisions of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women into the draft National Authority Law, the equivalent of a future constitution. Palestinian women's organizations knew that they had to grasp the historic moment to ensure that equality was enshrined in all Palestinian legal instruments. Leading Palestinian women inside and outside the occupied territories set up a special committee for the drafting of a declaration of principles, which was adopted in June 1994. This Women's Charter highlights personal status law, socio-economic rights, education and health. 11/

C. Women in leadership positions

15. The number of women in leadership positions has been growing. At present, women represent about 10 per cent of the Palestinian National Congress. From 25 members in 1980, their number increased to 35 in 1986 and 43 in 1992. Women did not hold any diplomatic position until 1980. In 1992, out of 93 women, two reached the level of ambassador. The 15-member Palestinian delegation to the Madrid Peace Conference, which began in October 1991, included three women. The spokesperson for the delegation was a woman. After the implementation of the self-rule agreement, a woman was appointed Minister for Social Affairs of the Palestinian Authority. A woman was appointed head of the women police, which enrolled about 70 women. 12/

16. In preparing for the future administration and establishment of interim self-government, the Palestinian Authority has set up a number of technical committees to define policies, and to assist the negotiating team in planning strategies and policies in all sectors. At the request of women's organizations, a Women's Affairs Technical Committee has been established. Its objective is to establish a system of governance that eliminates all forms of discrimination against women and ensures equal participation in the future legislative, executive and judicial structures. 13/

III. EDUCATION AND TRAINING

17. Palestinian educational achievement is, on average, the highest in the region, with 18 college graduates per thousand inhabitants. The high-quality human resource base has been recognized as the most important asset for the sustainable development of the occupied territories. 14/ The considerable increase - by 74.6 per cent - of the number of students in the past 20 years is partly due to the higher enrolment of girls. In 1967/68, girls represented 41 per cent of the school population; in 1989, their number reached 48 per cent.

18. Gender differences in enrolment appear in the final years of the preparatory cycle and in secondary schools. As much as 14 per cent of girls in the West Bank and 7.3 per cent in the Gaza Strip have not completed schooling. The major reasons given for the drop-out of girls above fourth grade elementary education include slow learning capacity, the political situation and the need to help at home or marry. 15/ Girls' lack of academic ability is linked to crowded classrooms, inadequacy of training material and non-availability of intervention programmes to allow girls a second entry after drop-out or failure.

19. Despite the success in providing compulsory primary education for girls and boys under adverse conditions, the quality of the education system and educational achievement are not satisfactory because of overcrowded schools, double shifts at the elementary level, lack of maintenance, inadequate teacher training, lack of educational material and low salaries. 16/ Girls' education is doubly affected by these adverse circumstances. Their enrolment in the non-compulsory secondary level remains low given the customary restriction on girls' mobility at the onset of puberty. Costs for education and the unequal geographical distribution of secondary schools are an additional obstacle.

20. The frequent closure of schools during the intifadah has had a long-term negative impact on educational achievement at the elementary level and will make it difficult to catch up in higher-level classes. It resulted in demotivation for continued education, in particular among girls, and increased illiteracy rates. During the period under review, disruption in education as a result of military closure orders, curfews and general strikes continued to decline. In UNRWA schools, only 10 per cent of school-days were lost, compared to 16 per cent in the previous year. Students from the Gaza Strip who were enrolled at UNRWA training centres in the West Bank did not get permission from the Israeli authorities to attend their classes owing to movement restrictions imposed in late February 1994. 17/

21. Illiteracy still persists among members o the adult population who have had no schooling or less than six years of schooling. Women of all ages were more likely than men to be illiterate, especially women over 34 years of age and those living in rural areas or refugee camps. In 1990, the data collected on illiteracy in West Bank villages and the Gaza Strip showed that between 30 and 55 per cent of women and between 10 and 35 per cent of men were reported as illiterate. 18/ The popular committees, in particular women's committees, have undertaken a large programme of literacy training for women of all ages in the rural areas and refugee camps. Methods of functional literacy training have been used, linking literacy training to education about health, nutrition, hygiene and child care. However, many women after graduating from a literacy programme gradually lose their skills because of lack of practice. 19/

22. The opening of various institutions of higher learning in the occupied territories between 1967 and 1987 brought with it the most significant change in women's education. Since the 1960s, eight universities have been set up in the occupied territories. In 1991, 25,393 students were enrolled in universities and other third-level institutions. Female students comprise 44 per cent of the total student population in the Gaza Strip and 46 per cent in the West Bank. Young women, who had no opportunity to pursue their education previously, could enrol in universities located close to their homes. This launched a democratization process which engendered broader participation in higher education, since the local universities offered educational opportunities for students from rural areas and refugee camps. The important percentage of women in tertiary education has created a new elite of highly educated women who became politicized during their university education and have become actively involved in setting up women's committees. Women still opted for typical female studies, with 26 per cent in education science and the humanities and only 5.7 and 0.5 per cent in engineering and agriculture, respectively. 20/ Local universities were closed by the Israeli authorities at the beginning of the intifadah and only resumed their full activities in 1992. Access to universities in 1994 was frequently hampered by the Israeli authorities.

IV. EMPLOYMENT AND ACCESS TO ECONOMIC RESOURCES

23. Women's access to economic resources is difficult to assess in a society in which women's participation in the formal labour force has been very low. Traditionally, the main mechanism used to ensure women some form of independent economic resources has been the payment of a dowry at marriage. This has continued as an important social practice, although it is no longer a sustainable source of income or economic support for women, given increased living costs. Jewellery, land, livestock, bank savings or tools of the trade were the main form of women's independent property. With increasing age, women are giving away their dowry resources and investing them in the family. 21/ In times of economic hardship, families have had to fall back on accumulated resources. Women's individual resources were used up for family maintenance, which, in return, increased women's economic dependence on husbands or male family members. There is evidence that Palestinian families exhausted their resources during the years of the intifadah, especially during periods when they were cut off from any sources of labour income.

24. Women's participation in the labour force averaged 11.7 per cent in the West Bank and only 3.9 per cent in the Gaza Strip. Restriction on women's mobility has made it difficult to search for employment inside Israel. However, a significant number of women, in particular female heads of household, have worked as migrant agricultural workers despite social inhibitions. Israeli enterprises specialized in garment production set up subcontracting in the occupied territories, and exploited women by paying wages 50 per cent lower than wages for equivalent work in Israel. 22/

25. Unemployment has been very high for women with high school, vocational or university education. Early surveys of university graduates suggested that few of the female graduates went on to pursue professional careers. Women remained concentrated in secretarial and service work and in the caring professions, in particular nursing and teaching. The female concentration in teaching was very high, especially in primary education.

26. In the 1990s, many women's organizations established income- and profit-generating projects for women. 23/ A survey on Palestinian women's organizations in the occupied territories conducted in 1992 reported a total of 174 women's organizations, including cooperatives, voluntary services, committees, centres and production projects. They run specialized educational, training and production projects, day-care centres, kindergartens and rehabilitation and health centres. In the economic and social context of the occupied territories, income-generating activities provided by women's organizations offer possibilities for female access to the labour market, even if they remain in the realm of traditional female occupations.

27. There is a lack of information on women in the private sector. Data provided by the Chambers of Commerce of five cities in the occupied territories indicate that women constitute only 2 per cent of investors in trade offices, most of them operating with very low capital. Information was provided on an oil factory, in which 13 per cent of investors were women, and on a medical company in Jerusalem, where women constituted 65 per cent of the investors, although no woman was on its board of directors. 24/

V. HEALTH CONDITIONS AND SERVICE PROVISION

28. Health conditions and provision of services in the occupied territories have been negatively affected by the political situation since 1967 and deteriorated during the intifadah. A recent development assessment suggested that too little attention was being given by medical services to reaching out to groups, especially women. 25/ The health-care system focused on female reproductive health and did not provide for women's health problems throughout the life cycle.

29. The West Bank has a high birth rate, at about 4.5 per cent, which has an adverse effect on the health of mothers. Infant mortality has been persistently high, at 50 to 100 deaths per thousand live births in the late 1970s and early 1980s. 26/ The disruption of all aspects of routine life during the intifadah may have resulted in a non-reporting of infant deaths. Birth practices have changed over the past 20 years, including a progressive increase in the

proportions of births occurring in hospitals and medical centres. In 1990, only 20 per cent of mothers in the Gaza Strip and 32 per cent in the West Bank gave birth at home. The discrepancy between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip can be explained by the greater number and closer availability of medical services in the Gaza Strip, in particular through UNRWA clinics where pre- and post-natal care is provided. UNRWA also expanded its services of family planning in the context of maternal health. A rise in maternal anaemia in the third trimester of pregnancy has been reported for the West Bank (48 per cent) and the Gaza Strip (67 per cent). 27/

30. A recent survey conducted by UNRWA in 1990 suggested that there had been an improvement in nutritional status in the refugee camps since 1984. Other surveys carried out in the rural areas of the West Bank, however, suggested that malnutrition of children outside the camps was more prevalent. The difference could be explained by the fact that poor families in the refugee camps were receiving substantial food supplies through UNRWA. The economic recession, aggravated in particular in 1993 by measures of collective punishment, had negative effects on nutritional standards. The incidence of childhood anaemia, which has been as high as 70 per cent in camps in the Gaza Strip and 58 per cent in the West Bank, has an impact on a child's physical and psychological development. 28/

31. There is an acute shortage of doctors and clinics in the occupied territories. Non-governmental organizations and medical committees play an important role in providing health services in the West Bank, where they reach 45 per cent of the population through 132 clinics. One of the health service non-governmental organizations, the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees is providing health services adapted to women's needs and priorities without focusing only on maternity health care. It is functioning with a network of volunteers and mobile clinics and puts emphasis on education campaigns and the training of rural women as village health workers. 29/

VI. VULNERABLE GROUPS

32. The violence to which the occupied territories have been exposed since the outbreak of the intifadah greatly increased the number of persons with disabilities. UNRWA has been running a physiotherapy programme, together with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in six clinics in Gaza and five in the West Bank, but has not been able to meet the need for treatment. A great number of the injuries have led to permanent disability for which specific community care is needed. The UNRWA community-based rehabilitation programme for the disabled has had to further expand its provision of vocational rehabilitation. Since most of the injured are young men, women have had to take on the role of caregivers and providers of family income.

33. The number of female-headed households is high in the occupied territories. Some 36.6 per cent of all households in the West Bank are headed by women, compared to 17.9 per cent in the Gaza Strip. These figures do not include de facto female headship, where male heads of household have migrated for a longer period. 30/ Women heads of household face numerous legal, social and economic problems. The agreements between Israel and the PLO had a favourable

impact on household composition since a number of long-term deportees returned to the occupied territories.

VII. PRIORITIES FOR ASSISTANCE

34. Following the signing of the Declaration of Principles, the programmes and agencies of the United Nations system have intensified their efforts to promote sustainable economic and social development in the occupied territories. In May 1994, the Secretary-General appointed a Special Coordinator in the occupied territories to facilitate coordination among the programmes and agencies to ensure an integrated and unified approach to development.

35. UNRWA identified projects that would improve social and economic conditions and infrastructure in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and that could be turned over to the Palestinian Authority in the future. The women's programme of UNRWA was gradually being integrated into the broader network of women's organizations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in order to achieve greater independence. Two of the 14 women's programme centres were given over for management by elected women's committees, while still being assisted technically and financially by UNRWA staff. 31/

36. The United Nations Development Programme sent a Needs Assessment Mission for Palestinian Women to the West Bank and Gaza Strip in early 1994. The purpose of the mission was to collaborate closely with the evolving leadership of Palestinian women in developing a policy framework for facilitating equal access to and participation in all development efforts as well as in defining the requirements for nation-building efforts. The report of the mission sets out recommendations for action in all fields and policy interventions and operational action to achieve the objectives concerning women and governance. 32/

37. Following a review and analysis of previous cooperation, UNICEF has updated its programme of cooperation for Palestinian women and children in the West Bank and Gaza in close dialogue with the Palestinian Authority and its various institutions, United Nations agencies, non-government organizations and donor partners. UNICEF assistance gives priority to empowering women and girls to become full participants in the economic and social development process. The health programme focuses on maternal and child health, including safe motherhood and reduction of maternal mortality, and education relating to childbirth, motherhood and nutrition. The education component addresses gender disparities and promotes girls' education through formal and non-formal means. In support of greater participation of women in economic life, UNICEF is helping to develop a system of early child care. A youth and community development component, with a focus on girls, aims at constructive action for young people.

38. The International Labour Organization (ILO) sent an interdisciplinary mission to the occupied Palestinian territories in December 1993, the objective of which was to establish a plan of action to assist in the transition to political autonomy, in particular in the areas of human resource development, employment creation, labour institutions, social protection and equality for women. The proposals of the mission aim at promoting women's employment

opportunities in agriculture, and small business and industrial development, through targeted poverty alleviation schemes and entrepreneurship development programmes. The integration of the principle of equality of opportunities for men and women in the current process of planning, priority setting and institution-building, with a special emphasis on labour law and international standards, is underlined. In view of the release of thousands of detained persons and prisoners, specific education and training needs have arisen. 33/

39. The World Bank estimated that US$ 5 million would be needed to fund programmes for women and youth during the interim period leading to the autonomy of the occupied territories. UNICEF, as a possible coordinating and implementing agency in this area, would earmark $2 million to mother and child health. 34/

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

40. As the peace process in the occupied territories and the self-rule area of Jericho and the Gaza Strip is being consolidated, many actors have recognized the importance of integrating the gender perspective in all areas of legislation, infrastructure development and human resource and economic development at this crucial period. Preparing for de facto and de jure equality between men and women is of primary importance. Palestinian women need practical support and assistance at all levels, from counterparts inside and outside the occupied territories, in their endeavour to become citizens with equal rights and responsibilities. The findings in the present report show that there is potential for development and that resources and support need to be made available immediately in order to create the necessary infrastructure, especially in the field of education, health and employment.

Notes

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2/ Arab Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000, adopted at the Arab Regional Preparatory Meeting, held at Amman from 6 to 10 November 1994, chap. I, para. 14.

3/ See note by the Secretary-General transmitting the report of the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian People and other Arabs of the Occupied Territories (A/49/511), p. 5.

4/ Report of the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, 1 July 1993-30 June 1994 (Official Records of the General Assembly, Forty-ninth Session, Supplement No. 13 (A/49/13)), para. 25.

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